

**Sh'ma Koleinu: Hear Our Voice.
We Do Not Need To Face This World Alone
Rosh HaShanah Sermon – 5778**

Something crumbled inside of me as I watched Charlottesville's beautiful streets fill with hate-spewing marchers.¹ Protesting for the preservation of a confederate statue of Robert E. Lee, they carried swastikas and banners that read, "Jews are Satan's Children". And they chanted the Nazi slogan "Blood and Soil". Unlike the KKK of previous generations, these tiki-torch-wielding white-supremacists weren't wearing hoods.

We aren't immune to hate in Charlotte either. Since last year, Temple Beth El has received intimidating phone calls and bomb threats. Members have had swastikas drawn in their driveways. Our children have been called antisemitic names at school. The persistence of antisemitism and the vigor of bigotry remind us, disturbingly, that white supremacist movements are not relics of the past.

Antisemitism is not our only concern, however. The international scene is terrifying – with raging wars, millions of refugees, and nuclear staring contests. Here at home, academics are becoming wary of "fake news". Members of the media are distraught at being monolithically attacked for accurate reporting. Friendships have been damaged by polarizing social media posts. People on the political left are angry and scared. People on the political right are angry and scared. And people in the center feel alienated by simplistic black and white dichotomies that fail to grasp nuance and complexity. At best, once-fringe groups are becoming more vocal and visible. At worst, our society is profoundly sick.

On these High Holy Days we plead to God in the *Avinu Malkeinu: Sh'ma Koleinu*, God Hear our Voice, the world is a scary place and we looking for answers.

And it is unnerving—both to us as individuals and to the Jewish community as a whole. Since becoming your rabbi, I've heard from many of you about your anxieties and fears. Some members have told me that they no longer recognize or are questioning our country's values. Others have openly wondered, if Charlottesville happened, what's next? I've heard from parents who abhor weapons but have found themselves in a gun shop, distressed that they don't have a way to defend their family if society breaks apart. Couples have come to see me to discuss their applications for citizenship in other countries, seeking guidance because they can't agree on what conditions in our country will warrant an exodus. There has been a huge uptick in people seeking pastoral visits and phone calls. Reverberations of anxiety, pain, and fear are ringing through our lives. We are desperate for security and reassurance, *Sh'ma Koleinu*, Hear our voice.

It is human nature to want security. Lock the Door. Close the Blinds. Hunker down while the storms rage. And in some ways, we have never been more secure. Alarm systems can remind us to turn on the alarm after we have left the house. We can quickly order the supplies we need to weather the storms. We can even get dinner and dessert delivered to cheer us up in

¹ A few sentences of this paragraph were influenced from the CCAR's "One Voice for the New Year 2017," a message crafted and designed to delivered by rabbis across the country.

the meantime! But like many things that seem too good to be true, the side effect of this reassurance delivered on-demand is a sense of isolation and fear.

As Jewish commentator, Naomi Klein observes, “Security comes from community and solidarity. Security comes from how solid [our] ties are, not what [we] own.” That is the paradox: we, who are seeking security, feel insecure because what we own doesn’t actually protect us. Instead, it makes us feel more isolated. And this isolation can often erode the very communities and connections that provide us with metaphysical security: a sense of true belonging, meaning, and depth in our lives. This paradox – of having so much at our fingertips so instantly, yet feeling somehow deeply disconnected and unfulfilled – feels all too familiar.

In ancient Israel, our people lived through invading foreign powers, ethnic cleansing, and religious persecution. Generations hoped that they could buy security by spending lavishly on the sacrifices that would persuade God to hear their prayers. They expected the priests to hasten a Messianic time, when all their troubles would vanish and when they would finally be free from war, poverty, suffering, and fear.

The prophet Amos, however, took a stand against this popular belief, shocking the worshipers with a message they had never heard before. Prayer, Amos explained, may be helpful in sensitizing us to God’s Divine will, but what good are prayers—what hope will prayers bring—when we choose to pay for instant reassurance while trying our hardest to avoid the scary truths of uncertainty? Amos’s message suggests that whether our world is filled with light or darkness tomorrow depends upon how we live, in relationship, today.²

We continue to face this paradox —of wanting to shrink back and hide in reaction to an unstable world, yet no matter the walls we erect, we still feel unsettled and unsafe. Here at Temple Beth-El, our baby boomers articulated this tension between security, isolation, and community in a large-scale listening campaign that we launched last year. Hundreds of empty nesters told us that they feel disconnected from other Jews and desire a spiritual home. Connections that had been made so easily through children’s activities are now gone. They are facing life transitions and feeling pulled by powerful societal forces that they are struggling to comprehend. One member of Temple summed it up saying, “I’m in my late 50’s and still looking for my anchor.”

What was interesting about the boomers’ feedback is that it hardly seems unique. Sure, specific tensions differ at each stage of life. But we’ve heard similar comments from unsettled millennials, from seniors, from concerned parents and from our teens and children. They have told us that they feel enslaved by an American culture that emphasizes ambition, busyness, and superficial interactions. They have found themselves pulled by powerful forces of careers and immersive technology, yet find themselves looking for “something more.” We’re searching for meaning, a way to belong, Sh’ma Koleinu: Hear Our Voice.

But the tension at the heart of this quest is that true belonging is not something we can negotiate externally, it’s what we carry in our hearts. It’s finding the sacredness in being a part of something bigger than ourselves. Bestselling author Brene Brown recently published a book on this very topic. She explains that in understanding true belonging we must “address [the

² This is a broad summary of the entirety of Amos concerns. For further reading, see Amos 2:6-16; 3:9-10; 4:4-5; 5:10-13 and 5:21-27.

relationship between] how our increasingly polarized world shapes our lives and our experiences of connection and belonging.”³

It makes sense to me right now, when the world can feel unsettling and unstable, that our instinct is to isolate and hunker down.⁴ With the winds of society pushing in every direction, with uncertainty ahead, we want what anchors us and helps us feel rooted. But, as Amos reminds us, real security doesn't come from the easy fix of an alarm system or a list of services provided in a pay-to-pray world. It comes from being seen, known and loved for who we are and from seeing, knowing and loving others for who they are. It is in our relationships where we will connect with each other and with God.⁵ Amos pushed our ancestors to act together in community despite the raging storms – to support each other with intention of establishing a future of hope, meaning, resiliency, justice, and purpose.

So we're called to combat this spiritual crisis of disconnection with one of our most valued spiritual possessions: the act of bearing witness to one another. We must share and listen to the truths in each other's lives, we must celebrate with each other, mourn with each other, we must walk through life together and see the Godliness that exists in each other's souls.⁶ Sh'ma Koleinu: Hear Our Voice. Hear our voices, together.

But bearing witness to the truth is hard. It requires vulnerability and it requires real effort. We can't sit back and wait for community to come to us. We have to build it. We have to become it. We have to create a living and breathing community that draws from the best of our sacred tradition. This is a vision of a community in which we invite each other to become the stakeholders who can and will face the hurdles of today and tomorrow.

And this isn't some far off dream. In the months ahead, the baby boomer leadership team will be developing small groups to connect, learn, and wonder with each other. We will create travel and learning opportunities and help people find ways to care for one another and join hands to make a better city.

But let's also be clear: knowing that we need connection in our lives does not always lead us towards developing community. Even when we have the best of intentions, we sometimes need support and a hand reaching out to us, inviting us to come along, prodding us to leave the comforts of home and to put ourselves out there. To that end, I'm excited that we have hired Andy Harkavy as our new Director of Congregational Engagement to mobilize our lay leaders to do just that. Andy is here today with his wife Megan and three-month-old, Eli.

Andy's task is to engage our leaders in listening to each other and developing meaningful relationships that model the values we know that we want but have trouble achieving on our own: How we can learn together and laugh together? How can we act and care for one another? How can we have fun together? How can we make a difference in the world?

It's important to emphasize that Andy is not here to create or develop more programming for programming sake. Andy's partnership with lay leaders – and his leadership with our entire congregational staff - will be based on the idea that authentic and genuine living

³ Brene Brown, *Braving the Wilderness*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Martin Buber: I and Thou.

⁶ This is a main thesis of Brene Brown's book, *Braving the Wilderness* and is consistent with Buber's theology of I and Thou, that through relationships of mutuality we can connect to God. "Extended, the lines of relationship insect in the eternal You."

is about growing and becoming who we are, at every stage of life, in relationship with one another. In the coming years we will explore how personal spiritual practices, communal prayer and ritual and celebration can better cultivate community. We will expand our engagement efforts to a group that we have historically underserved, families and individuals between 30-50 years old. We will transform our adult education, to develop community teachers and new learning opportunities. Even our approach to social justice – as Rabbi Klass spoke about last night – must begin with the development of partnerships between lay leaders, staff, and clergy.

But this isn't something that our professional and lay leaders can simply do for *you*. We need you to consider how Temple and Judaism isn't something that we consume, but something that we grow, produce, and cultivate in our own lives. This isn't a membership plug or a request to come to Temple programming. A solid community is more than making Sacred Gifts and asking what Temple can do for you. It's about building a vibrant, inclusive community, where we feel strongly connected to our congregation because we are actually connected to each other. We want you to become the Temple - to foster relationships that motivate all of us to live meaningful and impactful Jewish lives. And by doing so, we can extend the perimeter of our Jewish lives well beyond the confines of this building or even Shalom Park. We need you to help us do the work that none of us can do alone in isolation; the hard but ultimately rewarding task of creating connection, meaning, happiness, and safety.⁷

Sh'ma Koleinu: Hear Our Voice. In a world that can overwhelm and mystify us, we are hungry for authentic, genuine, real-life connections. Safety and security cannot be purchased a la cart. Each of us has a role to play. Within the darkness of our world, it is in smaller circles of relationship that we will kindle the light for our lives. The sound of the shofar cries out to us: Wake up and live. Consider the truths in our lives, consider who you are, and who you can yet be. We can't fool ourselves into thinking that we can take a shortcut to purpose and meaning. It is not in isolation, but rather in community, that we experience real safety, that we can foster creativity. It is in community where we will yet imagine the possibility of a tomorrow built upon the human and spiritual foundations that will sustain our homes, our lives, our relationships, and help us pass our faith to future generations. Sh'ma Koleinu. Hear our Voice. Hear all our voices. We do not need to face this world alone.

Amen.

⁷ It's important to acknowledge the myriad ways in which our congregation has already successfully explored what these structures and small circles might look like. SPICE, the PORCH, or Sacred Gifts, studying all over the city and having a good time everywhere, Temple Beth El has created the initial frameworks for lasting relationships and meaningful Jewish engagement. It should be a point of pride for this congregation—the first fruits of such work have planted seeds of possibility.